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CHRISTIANITY IN ASIA

Christianity began in Asia. But of all the great continents Asia today is statistically the least Christian. In a world where one in every three people professes to be Christian, Asia's population of two and three-fourths billion (excluding the USSR) is only 5% Christian. Comparable estimates for other Asian religious groups are 23% Hindu, 18% Muslim, 10% Buddhist and 8% folk religionist. 20% claim to be non-religious, principally in China. To understand the reasons for the numerical weakness of Christianity on its own home continent one must turn first to history.

The Christian faith spread eastwards across Asia as quickly as it moved west into Europe but with this significant difference. In the west it converted and transformed the culture of a whole continent. In non-Roman Asia, not once in its first sixteen centuries did it manage to achieve majority influence in any enduring national power center.

A history of Asian Christianity could be fitted into a rough framework of alternating expansion and decline: (1) Early advance (50-650),

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(2) Recession: Islam and the fall of the T'ang (650-1000); (3) Revival under the Mongols (1000-1370); (4) Years of devastation (1370-1500); (5) The Catholic centuries (1500-1700); (6) Controversies and decline (1700-1792); (7) Protestant beginnings and the rise of the Asian churches (1792-).

In its period of earliest expansion Asian Christianity was impressively successful in geographical extension, less so in penetration of major cultures. Before the end of the first century St. Thomas, "the apostle to Asia" had reached India, according to ancient and believable tradition. About the same time the new faith broke across the Roman border into east Syria and Persian Mesopotamia. By the end of the second century the border principality of Edessa (Osrhoene) was largely Christian and its king Abgar VIII may well have been the world's first ruler of a Christian state. In 300 Armenia officially adopted the Christian faith but ecclesiastically became more western than Asian.

The church in Persia, however, was strong enough early in the fifth century to organize itself into a national church independent of the western patriarchs. It called itself the Church of the East

but is better known by its later name, Nestorian. In the remarkable missionary advance across Asia which followed, Nestorians carried the faith from the Red Sea to the heart of China. Three Arab Christian kingdoms emerged. The tribes of Central Asia began to convert to the Christian faith. Persian missionaries reached the T'ang capital of China as early as 635 AD. But it was only in the fringe kingdoms at the edges of imperial power that decisive numbers became Christian. The key cultural and political centers, Persia, China and India, were often hostile, at best tolerant. The first six centuries were years of steady but limited success.

By contrast the next three hundred and fifty years brought sharp set-backs. The first blow was the rise of Islam. When the Arabs destroyed Persia and rolled Byzantine Rome back into Europe they quenched the flickering hope that the Nestorians might do for Asia what Catholic and Orthodox Christianity was accomplishing in the west, the conversion of a continent. But Islam did not destroy Christianity; it simply encapsulated it, adapting from the defeated Persians a form of religious minority control by ghettos. Christians were offered no heroic choice of death or apostasy,

only the eroding humiliations of isolation, double taxation and harsh social discrimination. The best that can be said of the ghettos is that they allowed the Nestorians to survive for centuries and to serve as conduits of Greek learning through the Arabs to a barbarianized Europe.

Beyond the limits of Arab conquest Christian growth was less restricted. The Nestorians were able to maintain intermittent contact with the Thomas Christians of south India, and the Persian mission to China flourished for another two centuries. Then suddenly it disappeared. The fall of the T'ang dynasty in 907 was probably the major cause. The church had become too dependent upon imperial favour. But it had already been weakened by a spate of anti religious persecutions in the mid-ninth century, and by its failure to take root among the Chinese. It seems to have remained a religion for Persian priests and tribal groups.

By the year 1000 Christianity appeared to be a receding wave in Asia. In the Arab caliphates, south India and Central Asia, it existed only in isolated pockets. At this low point a Christian resurgence appeared in the wild heartlands of Asia among the Mongol and Turkic nomads. A chieftan of

the Kerait was converted by Nestorian missionaries and was baptized, with many of his people. When the Keraites were later drawn into the emerging Mongol confederation they became the unexpected avenue of Christian penetration into a new Asiatic power center. Jenghiz Khan married his fourth son, Tuli, to a Nestorian Kerait princess. She became the mother of three sons, all of whom eventually ruled major divisions of the Mongol Empire, Mangu the third Grand Khan (1251-9), Hulagu the Ilkhan of Arabian Persia (1261-65), and Kublai, most famous of all, who became Grand Khan (1260) and Emperor of China (1280-94). None of the brothers became Christian but their reigns marked the high point of the Nestorian church in Asia, and for a fleeting moment of history a Mongol monk, ~~was~~ elected Nestorian patriarch as Yaballaha III (1281-1317), ~~and~~ ruled at least nominally a wider spiritual domain than the pope in Rome. ↗

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 In 1287 Argun, Ilkhan of Persia, confirmed the prestige of the Nestorians by choosing another Mongol monk as his ambassador to seek alliance from the Christian princes of Europe against the Muslims

Q But once again the Christian quest for political

security in Asia proved illusory. The west, disillusioned with crusades, hesitated to be drawn into another. Argun's son, the Ilkhan Ghazan (1295-1304), repudiated his compatriot, the patriarch, and embraced Islam. Worse yet, before the century was out, Tamurlane's wars of annihilation (1363-1405) displaced the more tolerant Mongols with a Muslim Turkic fanaticism that devastated Central Asia as far south as Delhi. Few Christians were left alive and Nestorianism never recovered from the break-up of Mongol power.

It was in the Mongol period also that Roman Catholicism first reached oriental Asia. Between 1245 and 1346 ten Catholic missions were sent to the Mongol khans. The most successful was that of the Franciscan John of Montecorvino who reached Peking in 1294, built two churches there and was made archbishop with the authority of a patriarch. But like the Nestorians, China's first Catholics vanished with the collapse of the Mongols in 1368.

A third period of Christian advance in Asia opened with the dawn of the age of discovery. Da Gama's Portuguese fleet, anchoring off the coast of India in 1498, brought a host of Catholic missionaries in its train. Goa became the center for

x ecclesiastic expansion, and the arrival of the first Jesuit, Francis Xavier, touched off ten of the most intensive years of Catholic missionary expansion in Asian history. Between 1542 and his death in 1552 Xavier laid foundations of mass evangelism in India that still endure, strengthened mission outposts in Malacca and the Moluccas, and as the first Christian missionary to Japan so effectively pioneered the "Christian century" there (1549-1650) that Japan may well have had a higher percentage of Christians in 1600 than it has today. A tragic by-product of the coming of the west to India, however, was its effect on the ancient Thomas Christians. This Indian Syrian community had maintained tenuous connections with the Nestorians in Baghdad for centuries. Now it was first proselyted by the Portuguese, and then left fractured when large groups of Syrian Christians rebelled against the jurisdiction of Rome and reasserted their indigenous Christian loyalties. In Japan a greater tragedy, the savage Tokugawa persecutions, ended the Christian century, wiped out the church and left only a shattered underground.

The Roman Catholics in China (1583-1774) as in Japan enjoyed remarkable initial success. Matthew Ricci's strategy of accommodation to local customs

and skillful use of western science won the attention of the Confucian intelligentsia and gradually established Jesuit presence and influence in the court of Peking so firmly that when the Ming emperors fell in 1644 the church in China for the first time was able to survive the fall of a friendly dynasty and make itself indispensable to the new Manchu rulers. But an ecclesiastical catastrophe, the rites controversy, ended the Catholics' century-long rise to Chinese favour. At issue was the Jesuit policy of accommodation to such Confucian ceremonies as veneration of ancestors. In 1704 the pope ruled against the Jesuits. The result was an angry impasse between a Chinese emperor, K'ang Hsi, resentful of foreign interference with his Jesuit advisers, and an inflexible pope.

The abolition of the Jesuit order in 1773 and the paralysis of France's great missionary societies by the French revolution brought Catholic expansion throughout Asia almost to a standstill. Only in the Philippines did Roman Catholicism continue a phenomenal growth that by 1800 had made the islands the ^{one} ~~only~~ land in Asia with a Christian majority.

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Meanwhile a fourth wave of Christian advance was moving into Asia carrying Protestantism for the

first time to the continent. As early as 1598 Dutch merchants began to send chaplains to their trading posts in the East Indies. Instructed to preach also to non-Christians the chaplains baptized thousands throughout the islands of what is now Indonesia. The movement's weakness was its mixture of colonial, commercial and religious motives, and it was only after a Danish mission of German Pietists to Tranquebar in 1706, and William Carey's still more significant mission to India in 1792, that Protestant missions picked up the momentum and clarity of focus that made them the dominant new factor in Christian advance in Asia in the 19th century.

Among the pioneers after Carey were Robert Morrison in China (1807), Henry Martyn in Persia (1811), Adoniram Judson in Burma (1812), J.C. Hepburn in Japan (1859), and Ludwig Nommensen in Sumatra (1862). Though Christianity and westernization often came hand in hand, evidence abounds of efforts by the missionaries to separate the advance of the faith from the spread of empire. Independent missionary societies multiplied. Emphasis on self-support, self-government and self-propagation (the "three selfs") led towards church independence from foreign control and to interdenominational

church unions. Especially noteworthy was Christian influence on Asian cultures in the fields of education, medicine and women's rights.

The collapse of colonialism after World War II accelerated the rise of national Asian churches. Since 1900, despite countermovements like communism and revitalized eastern religions, Asia's churches multiplied the number of their adherents eight times, from only 19 million at the beginning of the century to an estimated 148 million in 1985. In the same period continental population only

tripled. Fervent evangelism, social compassion and concern for human rights contributed to the growth of Christian influence. ^{Asian theologians, notably in India and Japan, won new intellectual respect for the faith} ~~Asian~~ ^{in Asia} Catholics outnumber Protestants about 5 to 3. 70% of all Asia's

Christians are concentrated in four countries: the Philippines (50 million), India (27 million), Indonesia (17 million) and South Korea (12 million). But still only one in about 18 Asians is Christian.

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- Samuel Hugh Moffett

YUN CH'I HO (Baron Yun Tchi-Ho, 1867-1946) aristocrat, reformer and Christian leader, was sent at ~~age 15~~ to Japan for special training in international languages, ^{and} ~~he~~ returned in 1883, age 17, as interpreter for the first American Minister to Korea, Gen. Foote. After the uprising of December 1884 he went for safety to Shanghai, enrolling in the Anglo-Chinese College, where in 1887 he became a Christian, the first Korean Methodist, and the first Korean nobleman to become a Protestant.

That same year he went to America where he became an eloquent student champion of foreign missions at Emory College and in the theological course at Vanderbilt. He returned to China in 1893 and two years later went home with his Chinese bride to Korea.

High family connections and remarkable linguistic ability in five tongues (Korean, Chinese, Japanese, English and French) won him advancement at court as vice-minister of education, ^{and} Korean representative to the coronation of the Russian Czar and the Jubilee Celebrations of Queen Victoria. His most important position was as vice-minister of the King's powerful Advisory Council.

But in 1896 his international experience

and ~~strong~~ ethical convictions led him to risk his career and join the young reformers, Philip Jaisohn (So Chae-Pil) and Syngman Rhee, in founding the Independence Club. [^] As president of the club Yun led mass meetings in Seoul in 1898 which wrung from a reluctant officialdom rights of free speech and assembly and certain democratic limitations on royal

power. ^{He also edited two ^{early Korean} newspapers, ~~one in Korean~~ and one ^{which was} bi-lingual, The Independent.} But reaction was swift. Yun was abruptly

sent north as a district magistrate and the Independence Club collapsed. By the time he returned to power as acting Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1905, it was too late for either reform or independence. Japan was in control.

His activities under Japanese colonial rule were restricted to religious affairs. He

founded a successful Anglo-Korean School in Kaesong ^{was one of the two Korean delegates to the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (1910)} (1907), [^] was unjustly imprisoned for alleged anti-

Japanese conspiracy (1912-15), became General-Secretary of the YMCA (1915-20), and for an unhappy period during World War II was president of what is now Yonsei University.

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Book Review S. H. Miffett



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Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom

By Orlando E. Costas

Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis, 1982. 238 Pp. \$12.95.

This collection of new and old essays by the Thornley B. Wood Professor of Missiology at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia has all the characteristic fire and conviction of his earlier *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World* (1974). It dodges none of the major issues that have sparked debate on missions since the end of World War II. Costas is never afraid of the clash of opinions.

He lives, he says, in-two-divergent cultures,- the North American- to which his family emigrated from Puerto Rico, and the Hispanic in which he was born and to which he has now in his heart returned. Theologically as well, he moves between two worlds. He is at home both with the evangelical orthodoxy of his biblical faith, and in the wider circles of ecumenical dialogue-but not so much at home that he stands dead center in either. He seems to prefer the tensions of both, and writes, as he admits, always "from the outside." Out of this mixture comes a yeasty blend of challenge and assent.

The book is divided into two parts. The first looks at mission from the underside of oppression, as a Latin American sees it. The second is from the perspective of the marginalized Hispanic minority in North America.

Four of the six chapters in the first part have been translated from the original Spanish. The subjects range from a discussion of the incarnation as the theological base for contextualization in mission (chap. 1), and a look at the church growth movement (chap. 3), to an appeal for "third world mission" to the United States (chap. 5), or, better yet, for united mission to both Americas *from* both Americas (chap. 6).

"Christ today is a black South African, a Latin American peasant, a Cambodian refugee," he writes to dramatize his insistence that Christian mission today must begin with contextualizing after the pattern of the incarnate Christ who emptied himself and bore affliction as "the suffering servant," identified with the poor and the oppressed. But incarnation without the resurrection is only half a mission, he quickly adds, recovering his theological balance. For "the true identity of Jesus Christ is not determined by our cultural identity," much less by Marxist ideology, but "by the New Testament." How else, he asks, can the oppressed be sure that their Christ is not as much a distortion as the oppressors' Christ which they reject?

That blend of appreciation and reserve is typical of the essays. It is the way he analyzes the church growth school of missions. Is church growth really the test of mission? Well, yes and no. As an indispensable,



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penultimate tool, yes. But as the ultimate test, no. For growth itself needs testing, he says, and forthwith

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suggests four helpful ways to distinguish a church that is growing, from one that (to quote Ortiz) is "simply getting fat."

No book on mission from the Hispanic perspective would be complete without serious attention to liberation theology. Costas devotes an important short essay (chap. 8) to "The Prophetic Significance of Third World Liberation Theologies." Not limited to one chapter, the liberation theme runs through the book as pervasively as the counter-motif of evangelical fervour through which Costas filters it. The one always challenges the other in his thinking.

The whole church, he asserts, is deeply in debt to the liberation theologians, and he is proud of their Latin American base. They have rightly challenged orthodoxy to recognize the authenticating demands of orthopraxis; "faith without works is dead." They have shaken theology out of passive thought into transforming, vitalizing action. They have prodded "ethically impotent" ecclesiastical structures into a compassionate and responsible preference for the poor.

But he reminds us, in passing, that Latin America's own missionary hero, Bartolomé de las Casas, more than three hundred years ago threw himself into much the same kind of crusade for the oppressed, and about the more modern liberation model, Costas has some criticisms to make. It has a tendency, he points out, to define orthopraxis only in ideologically political terms, usually Marxist. Its view of human nature is overly optimistic. **The result is a latent universalism of grace and salvation which undercuts the biblical balance of grace and judgment.** Therefore it gives the impression that human engineering of political and social structures will be enough to bring in the kingdom, given the benign but distant approval of an all-merciful God.

The book is never dull. It is an excellent introduction to the controversial side of mission issues, striving always for honesty and fairness to all viewpoints, but as is often the lot of the mediator, perhaps not quite succeeding in satisfying the disputants that he has an adequate resting place of his own. In the longer footnotes where he attempts to answer his critics at some theological length, he is not always convincing.

And yet, despite occasional repetitions and minor inconsistencies that are inevitable in a collection of essays written over a considerable length of time, and despite what seems to at least one reader from Asia to be an overstatement of North America's imperial faults and an understatement of South American responsibilities for some of its own predicaments, this is one of the best books available for an understanding of current attitudes in mission studies. His critical comparison of two recent conferences on mission, ecumenical Melbourne and evangelical Pattaya, for example, and the thirty-two pages of selected bibliography at the end of the book, are of real worth. The book is to be recommended to everyone interested in the present state of the world Christian mission.



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Costas summarizes his message, at one point, with these quotable words: "Salvation lies outside the gates of the cultural, ideological, political and socioeconomic walls that surround our religious compound and shape the structures of Christendom. It is not a ticket to a privileged spot in God's universe but, rather, freedom for service. This is why Jesus said: 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.' "

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